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Book Review: Bienfait: The Saskatchewan Miners' Struggle of '31

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Bienfait: The Saskatchewan Miners' Struggle of '31. By Stephen L. Endicott. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002. xi + 180 pp. Photographs, illustrations, appendices, notes, annotated bibliography, index. \$60.00 cloth, \$21.95 paper.

A strike is a privileged moment for the historian. Floodlights get shone on the working lives of wage earners that would otherwise get little public attention. Issues of collective working-class organization and politics stand out vividly. The relative power of contending forces in capitalist society is starkly clear. And the events of the confrontation typically provide plenty of high drama. Stephen Endicott has taken hold of these elements in a well-remembered miners' strike on the Canadian Prairies and given us a fascinating, beautifully written account of working-class struggle in the depths of the Depression.

Southern Saskatchewan's Estevan coalfields had never seen strikes before some six hundred workers walked out of the region's six major mines in the summer of 1931. The low wages and harsh working conditions that were soon brought to light were certainly fuel for such a revolt, but for years various forms of stern industrial paternalism had kept the miners' grievances from congealing into confrontational solidarity. Like so many other western mining camps, this one drew together a diverse work force of immigrants from Britain and central and eastern Europe, who pulled together a lively community life in the semi-rural environment around the small village of Bienfait (pronounced "Bean-fate"). The spark that ignited the fire of resistance was a wage

cut, prompted by the coal operators' concerns about increased competition from a new strip-mining company. The flames were fanned by the arrival of Communist activists, who connected with radicals in the local Ukrainian population, and the organization of a local of the Mine Workers' Union of Canada, affiliated to the radical Workers' Unity League (WUL).

Endicott carefully describes the ensuing confrontation that would culminate in three strikers being killed by RCMP officers during a parade three weeks into the strike. He provides a vivid case study of standard strike-breaking tactics in the pre-WWII era: refusing to meet the union or negotiate; cutting off credit at company stores and threatening to evict strikers from company housing or shacks on company property; trying to turn public opinion against the miners by attacking the Communist connection and playing the "loyalty" card by calling on military veterans to defend their community against outsiders; recruiting enough scabs to create confrontation with strikers in hopes of provoking police intervention (strikebreakers were exasperated and infuriated by the local RCMP chief's unwillingness to be stampeded and his sympathy for workers' grievances); and lobbying all levels of government for support. Although it was state violence that eventually brought blood to the streets, Endicott makes clear that government officials and politicians initially moved cautiously, sending in mediators and a royal commission to attempt to diffuse the crisis.

The book also provides a carefully drawn picture of how union leaders strategized in such a hostile context: publicly calling for negotiations, foregrounding of the Anglo-Celtic leaders to deflect the charges of "disloyalty," and using mass pickets and public demonstrations to discourage scabs and display determination, but scrupulously avoiding violence. Endicott's close examination of union tactics in this strike gives us a good opportunity to assess the kind of unionism that the Communist-led WUL

offered workers and the difference that radical politics could make to union activities. He is keen to present the organization in the best possible light and marshals plenty of evidence to make a convincing case that it attracted solid support and trust among Saskatchewan's miners. I wish he had pushed further in analysing this "red" union, however. Aside from reporting the anti-communist hysteria of the miner owners and politicians and the stirring speeches of such radical visitors as Sam Scarlett and Annie Buller, he is oddly silent on the actual role played in union decision making by the local Communists and the national or regional organizers who came to town. We also get little sense of the larger life of the WUL across the country, particularly the way it fit into the strident, ultra-revolutionary "Third Period" of Communist politics. Aside from a stinging critique of local union secretiveness from the WUL's national secretary, Tom Ewen, Endicott shies away from telling us how the party was constructing this struggle for mass consumption in the pages of the *Worker*. Given what we know about the way Communists operated elsewhere at this point, it seems unlikely that the story can be reduced simply to one of unfair red-baiting of a struggling local union.

The strike did make national news and has survived in the historic memory of southern Saskatchewan and the Canadian left more broadly. In one of the most moving sections of the book, Endicott relates his efforts to retrieve that memory from two elderly sisters whose menfolk participated in the strike (one of whom was killed) and who had tried to bury it. The passage is a sharp reminder that, whatever historians may make of it, a strike can be an agonizing, painful moment in the lives of working people.

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